FOREWORD

"Always do what you are afraid to do." — Emerson

Lighten up. Each of us has at some point in our lives contemplated suicide. It's only human. The showfolk in this volume did more than contemplate a final curtain; they succeeded in carrying out the act. So you can consider these cautionary tales, on their own terms, as success stories. They wanted to bow out. Boy, they succeeded.

When Tom Mix died in a car crash I was just beginning to read, and as I had already decided Tom Mix was my favorite Western star, my eyes were drawn to the headline on the front page of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, "Tom Mix Dead!" I asked my grandmother, "What is dead?" She replied, "Death is sleep. Peace." Not a bad explanation to give a boy just learning to read, before he had personally experienced death. That came soon enough. Spot, the puppy I won as a prize conducting my Toy Orchestra, was poisoned by the gardener of the large estate across the street. Ground glass mixed in a ball of raw hamburger. (This gardener, a fanatical neatnik who hated all dogs as potential poopers on his manicured lawn, got away with the crime.) I buried Spot among the zinnias in our back yard, and I learned about death.

All creatures want to live. (As Susan Hayward screamed in the movie with the same title, *I Want to Live!*) Yet as that tarnished icon of the 20th century, Freud, pointed out, opposite Eros, the Life Instinct, lies the realm of Thanatos, the Death Instinct. Thanatos, brother of Eros, has his charms, fatal for the merry crew whose calculated conclusions make up the bulk of this book.

You will find in David Frasier's exhaustively researched compendium of cancelled careers some of the more emblematic suicides touched upon in my *Hollywood Babylon* books, such as the fatal plunge of Peg Entwistle from the top of the "Hollywood" Sign, or Lupe Velez's lurid final act on my street in Beverly Hills, North Alpine Drive, but you will find many more tragic tales of faces today forgotten, once famous and beloved, or the talented artists, the make-up geniuses who created those faces, and the creators of gowns that turned shopgirls into goddesses. All of these lives, and deaths, famous or obscure, retain our interest in Frasier's pithy and mordant portraits.

All major religions condemn the act of suicide, save one: Aleister Crowley's *Thelema*. In Crowley's credo, *Liber LXXVII*, also called *Liber OZ*, we discover these rules:

> Man has the right to live by his own law —
> to live in the way that he wills to do,
> to work as he will,
> to play as he will,
> to rest as he will,
> *to die when and how he will.*

Crowley died a natural death at the age of 72, and though the end was unpleasant — with crippling asthma attacks — he stuck it out to the bitter end. To each his own.

Are suicides cowards, as Mary Karr insists — newly converted to the Catholic Church and having survived an adolescent attempt of her own — or are they courageous, as Byron and Baudelaire make claim? Suicide is a ceremony in which the actor is both killer and victim — a truly juicy dual role. These actors choose to hang themselves, take poison, jump from high buildings, pierce their breasts with knives, slash their wrists with razors, shoot themselves, drown, die by every means imaginable.

These are those who actively woo death. This volume doesn't deal with the slow suicides — smoking and drinking — the chronic suicides that pursue a reckless and heedless lifestyle, that must include serial sexual encounters.

I count among my personal losses in the show business community my friend James Whale, the witty and brilliant director of *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*; Fred Halsted, pioneer in gay erotica; Donald Cammell, another Brit who chose to die by the gun in the manner prefigured in his masterpiece *Performance*. Then there were a couple of screenwriters who gave up fighting the Hollywood machine, and my own cameraman for my film *Lucifer Rising*, the talented Michael Cooper. A near-loss was the singer and actress Marianne Faithfull, whom I caught in the act of slicing her wrists with a razor in Mick Jagger's bedroom on Cheyney Walk in London. I bound up Marianne's wrists with one of her deco-patterned scarves and I guess saved her for her latter-day career as a torch singer. Marianne gave me the scarf as a souvenir — mottled with rust-colored blood stains. She promised me she wouldn't be so foolish again.

As I actively intervened in saving the life of Marianne Faithfull from an ill-considered suicide, I would, if I could, intervene in many of the cases in this volume and try to dissuade them. There are ill-considered suicides, and there are considered suicides, such as Richard Farnsworth's choice of shooting himself to shorten the agony of terminal cancer, calling Prince Sirki, as Thanatos was called in *Death Takes a Holiday*, superbly portrayed by Frederic March.

I continue to live by Crowley's credo, which allows it is "OK" to take your own life if that is your will. Yet the loss of my friends haunts me still. I think it's probably true that the dead continue to live in us, in both negative and positive ways. Death is part and parcel of the Sweet Mystery of Life.

So, dear reader, this book is not for the tenderhearted. You have been warned.

This is a book for Brave Hearts — who can look life and death in the face. Brave Hearts, read on.

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